

These are under the heading NOW THAT I'M OLDER...

A recent study has found women who carry a little extra weight live longer than men who mention it.

Remember back when we were kids and every time it was below freezing outside they closed the school? Yeah, me neither.

I may not be that funny or athletic or good looking or smart or talented. I forget where I was going with this....

And, finally, NEVER SING IN THE SHOWER! Singing leads to dancing, dancing leads to slipping, and slipping leads to paramedics seeing you naked. So remember – DON'T SING IN THE SHOWER! SING IN CHURCH! WHICH LEADS TO HEAVEN!

There are supposed to be 5 elements to a good story – religion, money, sex, family relationships, and mystery. So here is a perfect story: “God,” said the banker’s daughter, “I am pregnant – I wonder whose baby it is.” Today’s gospel has many of these elements – and it is a great story. Theologian John Shea suggests that we need to hear this gospel story with a high level of alertness in order to ‘hear – and get’ it. He encourages us to hear it as though Jesus has said to us: “Pull your chair up to the edge of the precipice and let me tell you a story.”

First, some background on this remarkable story – and the first thing to say is that this story almost didn’t make it into the gospel. For 10 centuries! Why? Because many thought it made Jesus look too soft on sin. But it starts off simply. Jesus had just sat down – this was the posture of a teacher – when a crowd brings a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery. That means that she would have been naked, ashamed, and terrified of being stoned. The law was quite clear that circumstantial evidence didn’t cut it. The law said “One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed,” Moses had written: “A matter must be established by the testimony of 2 or 3 witnesses.” This means that for some time, 2 or more of these men had been hanging around this woman’s house, watching in her window. We are not told how long they watched and how much they saw. But the cold-blooded premeditation of their spying tells us about the depth of their contempt for the woman – and Jesus.

Scholars have pointed out that the man involved in this adultery is not brought here, even though the law said he should be stoned too. One speculation is that the religious leaders had colluded with this man to set up the whole deal, so they let him slip away when they grabbed the woman.

They bring the woman to Jesus thinking “We’ve got Him now. If He shows mercy, we get Him for being soft on the law; if He says, “Stone her,” the crowds will never forgive Him.” In addition, the Roman authorities had forbidden the Jewish authorities from executing anyone, so if Jesus said, “Stone her,” He would be in trouble with Rome. So they stand there, with stones in their hands, just waiting for trap they have set to spring. (help from John Ortberg, EVERYBODY’S NORMAL UNTIL YOU GET TO KNOW THEM, p. 92-104)

And Jesus does a most curious thing. He says nothing, and bends down and begins to write on the ground with His finger. Then, looking up, He tells them, “Let the person among you without sin cast the first stone.” Then He bends down and writes for a second time with His finger. The key for interpretation is Jesus’ gesture of writing on the ground with His finger. Who writes with His finger? Who writes twice? God does. And what God writes with His finger and writes twice are the Ten Commandments, and He had to write them twice because Moses ‘broke’ them the first time. As he was coming down the mountain, carrying the tablets,

Moses caught the people in the very act of committing idolatry; gripped in a fever of religious and moral fervor, he broke the tablets of stone. Moses was the first person to break the commandments, and he broke them physically, thinking violence needed to be done for God's cause. Having broken them, he needed to go up the mountain a second time; before rewriting them, God gave Moses a stern message: "Don't stone people with the commandments! Don't do violence in my name! The people who wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery understood Jesus' gesture. Their divine interpreter, Moses, had it wrong. (adapted from Rolheiser, WRESTLING WITH GOD, p. 141-144)

Second, what do we do with this? Too often we are still stoning people with the commandments, falsely believing that God wants this violence from us – either in word or action. I invite you again to sit on the edge of the precipice of your pew and let me tell you yet another story, from the Desert Fathers. Once a brother committed a sin in Scetis, and the elders assembled and sent for Abba Poeman. (Original story has Moses, but I changed it so as not to confuse with the explanation of the writing twice with Moses). He, however, did not want to go. Then the priest sent a message to him, saying: "Come, everybody is waiting for you." So he finally got up to go. And he took an old sack, filled it with sand, punched a hole in the end, and threw it over his shoulders, carrying it to the meeting. The people who came to meet him said: "What is this, Father Poeman?" Then the old man said: "My sins are running out behind me, yet I do not see them. And today I have come to judge the sins of someone else." When they heard this, they said nothing to the brother, and pardoned him.

It is so easy to reduce religion to do's and don'ts. But once we start down that path, we lose touch with the depth of the Church, its rich mystical tradition, and even our basic goodness and humanity.

Ecclesiastical legalism may set the standards that define the Christian community, but Christian mysticism shows us the effort it takes to put on the mind of Christ. It is a reminder that there are times when we must choose between the dictates of the institution and the beauty of the faith. It is a choice between the mission of the clerical establishment to maintain the tradition, and the deep spiritual insights of those wisdom figures who make the living tradition real. Their very lives point to what it means to see the world as God sees the world.

The universal basis of this story and the gospel story is a clear one: Christianity is not about perfection. On the contrary, it is a reminder that sin remains always with us. It is an admonition to us to realize that it is the very nature of humanity to grow into God, one mistake at a time. Perfection is not what being human is about. Perfection is simply not attainable in the human condition. The function of being human is to become the best human beings we can be, one insight, one mistake, at a time. Then, knowing the struggle that comes with trying and failing over and over again, we become tender with others who are also struggling in the process.

Recognizing that we are human, perfection is at best a mirage, and at its worst a temptation to arrogance of the highest degree. It's the temptation to make 'sinners' – meaning those not us – the outcasts of the time. It separates those who think they are holy from the unholy ones, however defined. It makes clear who of us are close to God and who are not. Those who keep their Lenten resolutions we call pious. Those who always go along in silence we call humble. Those who never raise questions, especially in the Church, we call obedient. Those who attend all the rituals, we call holy. But we are quick then to deny communion to those who are seeking pluralistic ways to deal with pluralistic issues. Without even the grace to blush, the so called 'perfect' condemn as public sinners those who are struggling their way through difficult issues just like anyone else.

But this is not what Jesus taught. He had an openhearted approach to the human condition. He knows that each of us needs someone to accept and forgive us in our sin. Inside each of us, a truth rises to be heard: it is only mercy and meaning that can really deal with sin. It is the mercy we seek within ourselves that we must offer to others. It is the meaning of Jesus' presence among us that we must now seek ourselves to be.

Enter Jesus and Abba Poeman. Called to pass judgment on another, to publicly condemn the one already humiliated, they both refused to be part of the scene. Asked to do their religious duty, they refuse to be part of the gaggle of those who prefer tribunals to teaching. They come with healing and mercy, and they raise the souls of those deadened by the lashes of the law to the love of a forgiving God. Poeman acts like Jesus.

Both men condemned, yes, but not the ones they expect. Both condemn the condemners. Poeman, like Jesus, is the truly holy person, of all those assembled, who refuses to cast the first stone. And after all, doesn't Poeman also come to condemn us all for pretending to ourselves that the law can ever satisfy for or substitute for, the love of God? This is the love that we must each pour out upon the heads of the dishonored and distressed in our own lives.

Jesus and Poeman come to tell us that love without measure, love without cost, love without judgment is, after all, what all other spiritual practices are meant to develop in us. (adapted from Joan Chittister, IN GOD'S HOLY LIGHT, p. 18-21)